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WILLIAM SHAKSPERE,
GENTLEMAN



WAS
WILLIAM SHAKSPERE
A *GENTLEMAN*?

SOME QUESTIONS IN SHAKSPERE'S BIOGRAPHY
DETERMINED

BY

SAMUEL A. TANNENBAUM

"If no Gentleman, why then no Arms"

Taming of the Shrew, II. 1

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This Study
is respectfully and affectionately
dedicated to
DR. WILLIAM J. ROLFE,
whose industry and brilliant scholar-
ship have placed him in the front
rank of the Shakspeare scholars of
the world.

992882

*“When we in our viciousnesse grow hard
(Oh, misery on’t) the wise Gods seale our eyes
In our own filth, drop our cleare judgements, make us
Adore our errors, laugh at’s while we strut
To our confusion.”—Anth. and Cle., III., 13.*



THE least that should be required of a biographer is that he shall set forth the known facts in the life of his subject as accurately and as sympathetically as extant evidence will permit; that he shall not distort or manipulate that evidence, or disregard any of it, in accordance with preconceived theories or prejudices. Certainly, considering all that William Shakspeare means to humanity, the historian who undertakes to write the record of his life should report him and his cause aright. Instead of this, however, we find that, owing to ignorance of the meagre evidence at our command or to a failure to appreciate the importance of that evidence and, to a considerable extent, to carelessness and slavish following of preceding writers, the name and memory of William Shakspeare—the greatest artist in the tide of time—have been most unjustly vilified and calumniated almost beyond belief by those whose glory it should have been to exalt them. Were one to undertake the depressing task of looking for the *man* Shakspeare in most of his biographies he would find there the record of one born in poverty

and filth; lacking in education and breeding; addicted to loafing, drinking and poaching; guilty of libel and seduction; a fugitive from justice; a hard-hearted usurer; an adulterer, and so on *ad nauseam*. And this monster, this thing of shreds and patches, we are to accept for the "sweet swan of Avon," "silver-tongued Mellicert," "the soul of the age," the man whom rare Ben loved this side idolatry! Is it any wonder that Emerson, with this picture—this Frankenstein—before him, should have said (*Representative Men*, Boston, 1850, p. 215) that he could not marry the man who had led such a profane life to his verse, or that the Rev. William Henry Furness should not have been able to bring the life of William Shakspeare and his reputed works within a planetary space of each other? Not without justification has Shakspeare under the hands of his biographers been represented by Actaeon worried to death by his own dogs.

What little value is to be attached to this "damn'd defeat" on the poet's honor will become apparent when we show, as we intend to do, the failure of his biographers to get at the truth regarding some of the simplest facts in his life, their great facility in distorting and misinterpreting the evidence pertaining to them, and their predilection for the exercise of the

"biographic imagination."

One of the most significant and characteristic facts in the life of William Shakspeare is his father's application for a coat-of-arms. In the age of Elizabeth the distinction of ranks was carefully preserved—much more so than now—and every right-minded Englishman who could afford it longed for the distinction of bearing coat-armor and being writ down a "gentleman." John Shakspeare, the poet's father, actuated by the same motive and by a desire to perpetuate the esteem in which he was held by his townsmen,—as shown by his many civic honors,—sought this coveted privilege for himself and his posterity. The facts, briefly stated, are these: In 1596—about the time of the reorganization of the College by the Queen's Commission—he applied to the College of Heraldry, of which the notorious William Dethick was then the head, for the grant of a certain coat-of-arms (*Or*, on a bend *Sable* a tilting-spear of the first, the point upward headed *Argent*; and for his crest a falcon with his wings displayed, *Argent*, standing on a wreath of his colors, supporting a spear in pale, *Or*, armed *Argent*, and provided with a helmet, mantle and tassels, according to custom) alleging that a pattern (*sic*) thereof had been assigned to him during his bailiffship of Stratford-upon-Avon (an incorpor-

ated town), by Robert Cook, Clarenceux King-at-Arms, and asserting that he had a right thereto because of his services to that corporation, his marriage with Mary, the daughter of Robert Arden, Esquire (descended from the noble family of Arden of Park-Hall, who traced their lineage back to Guy of Warwick and the good King Alfred), his descent from one who had been advanced and rewarded by King Henry VII. for valiant and faithful services, and his ability to maintain the estate of a "gentleman." Three years later (1599) he reappeared at the College and applied to William Dethick, Garter King-at-Arms, and to the learned William Camden, Clarenceux King-at-Arms, for permission to impale the ancient arms of Arden with those of Shakspere.

It cannot be amiss here to inform the reader that of the two rough drafts of the 1596 grant preserved at the College neither is signed or sealed, and that no duly executed grant has yet been discovered. This is true also of the 1599 draft-grant (as it is of all drafts preserved at the College) which is peculiar also in the fact that it not only purports to permit John Shakspere's family to impale and quarter Arden arms with their own, but that it confers on them anew the right to bear the Shakspere arms as tho this had not been done before. The importance of these

facts will become manifest as we proceed.

It is curious that almost all who have attempted to write the "life" of William Shakspeare have taken it for granted—without a particle of evidence therefor—that the poet-dramatist, ambitious for an inherited rather than an acquired coat-of-arms (such a snob was the creator of Hamlet, Lear, Brutus and Othello!), was the prime mover in these attempts to have his family enrolled among the "armigeri," and that all but two or three have charged him, his father and the heads of the College, with having lied in almost every particular embodied in the applications. Considering the amount of abuse, expressed and implied, which has been heaped on all those concerned in these transactions one would suppose that the matter had received the careful attention of those who have written on the subject. But, as a matter of fact, so little study has been devoted to it that, as we have shown elsewhere (*Shakspeare's Coat-of-Arms*, New York, 1908), not a single writer during the past three hundred years has given a correct description or picture of the Shakspeare arms, and there is as yet no unanimity of opinion among Shakspeareans as to whether a coat-of-arms had or had not been granted, and, if made, when such a grant had been made.

Halliwell-Phillips, Kenny, W. C. Hazlitt and

Fleay were of the opinion that *neither of the proposed grants was ratified*; whereas Malone, Knight, Dyce, Hudson, Bohn and Nichols claimed that *both applications had been crowned with success*. The Rev. Joseph Hunter, R. G. White, Elze, Sidney Lee and H. W. Mabie assert that *only the 1599 application was duly executed*. Tudor Jenks, whose main interest in the Shakspeare "coat" is its decorative use in editions of his works, says that *the application for armorial bearings was not granted until 1599, "and then with an omission of the Arden arms."* Dr. Dowden, in his unmatched *Primer*, asserts that *an application was granted in 1597*. Dr. William J. Rolfe, whose twice-told tale is out of all hooping the sanest and most sympathetic and most readable biography of Shakspeare that has yet been written, is of the opinion that "neither of the drafts made in 1596 was duly executed" and that *the application in 1599 was granted as to the Shakspeare arms and as to some Arden arms but not those asked for*. (See *A Life of William Shakespeare*, by W. J. Rolfe, Boston, 1904, pp. 287-292.) Mrs. C. C. Stopes, who, as having come nearest the exact truth in the matter, stands in an enviable class by herself, says (*Shakespeare's Family*, London, 1901, pp. 22-32) that *the 1596 application was successful*, but she is in doubt whether the grant of the Arden

arms was ever completed.

The fact that no fully executed, engrossed and sealed patent of arms to John Shakspeare has been discovered is generally construed as proof positive that neither application was ratified by the Heralds. But this absence of a completed patent does not prove that none was issued. Considering the many fatalities that have occurred to blot out evidence relating to the poet,—such as the total destruction by fire of the Globe Theater in 1613; two great fires in Stratford subsequent to 1596; the great fire of London in 1666; the rebuilding and subsequent demolition of New Place, the poet's Stratford residence; the devastating influence of time; the ravages of enthusiastic, but short-sighted, relic hunters ,etc.,—the loss of this document seems a very natural and not unexpected occurrence. The completed patent was the property of the successful candidate for heraldic distinction, and it was therefore much more likely to succumb to one of the various agencies just enumerated than the draft preserved by the College authorities for purposes of record. Tradition records that the poet's only granddaughter, Lady Barnard, the last one of Shakspeare's family to occupy New Place, carried with her to Abington, her second husband's residence, many of the poet's private papers. If there is any truth

in this report the coveted patent was undoubtedly one of those papers, of which not a trace has yet been discovered. But the recent discovery made by Prof. Charles William Wallace encourages us to hope that a diligent search or a lucky accident may yet bring it to light.

As we have seen, in 1599 John Shakspeare again appeared before the College of Arms with an application for a coat-of-arms, and from this it has been argued that his application in 1596 did not terminate in accordance with his wishes. But this second application was not for an original grant of arms, nor for an "exemplification" of his arms, as Mr. Lee—and others after him—would have it, but for permission to impale with his own the arms of the ancient and noble family of Arden. There is no denying the fact that the 1599 draft does assign, grant, confirm and exemplify unto John Shakspeare his ancient coat-of-arms and that the Heralds say that they "have lyke-wise uppo' on other Escucheone impaled the same wth the Auncyent Arms of Arden," but it by no means follows that the contemplated transaction was an exemplification of unassigned arms borne by the Shaksperes. It is a matter of common knowledge that it was an almost invariable rule with the College to "assign, grant and confirm" an old patent when a

"gentleman" applied for some additional armorial distinction. That this abuse has not died out is evident from the complaint made against the College of Arms by A. C. Fox-Davies (*Genealogical Magazine*, Oct., 1901), that "the most trivial alteration desired can only be made by obtaining an entirely new grant of arms, and therefore of necessity by paying the whole of the fees (L. 76 10s.) again."

A third argument advanced in support of the theory that the 1596 grant did not pass is the fact that "in 1597 John Shakspeare was still described as 'yoman.'" But this proves only that "Willielmus Courte scriptor," the writer of the deed in which John was so described, was not aware of his client's recent distinction. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that the said deed, conveying to George Badger a slip of land belonging to the "birthplace," bears the date "vicesimo sexto die Januarii anno . . . 1596," i. e., Jan. 26, 1597, which was less than three months after the date of the grant of arms, too short a time for the fact to have become a matter of general knowledge. (It is also possible that the patent of arms was not signed by Dethick until a few weeks after Oct. 20, 1596—the date on the draft.) John did not call the scrivener's attention to the error because the document, being written in Latin, was not read to him.

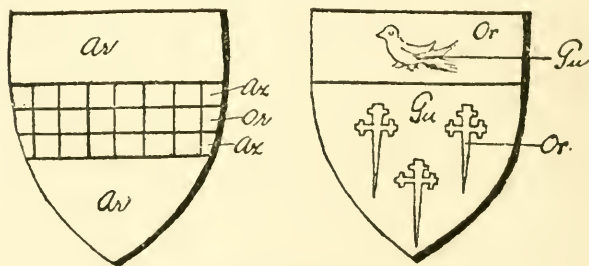
Old deeds, wills, etc., are notoriously defective in such minor details. (For a striking example of this sort of inaccuracy see *Deronshire Wills*, pp. 77 and 168.)

In one of the early editions of his "Outlines of the Life of William Shakespeare," Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps wrote: "Had a grant been made in 1596 it would have been so stated in 1599." Why the Heralds should have said anything about the date of the former grant does not appear. An examination of hundreds of patents has convinced us that it was the custom at the College never to give the date of a previous grant of arms. Every "gentleman" prefers to read in his patent "this his ancient coat-of-arms" than "this his coat-of-arms assigned to him in the year——." For the purposes of the Heralds it was sufficient to say that the applicant had arms of his own, and that his social rank was such as not to preclude him from impaling his wife's arms. The 1599 draft-grant does, as a matter of fact, declare that John Shakspeare produced an ancient "cote of arms heretofore assigned to him whilst he was her Majesty's officer and baylife." The truth of this assertion has been unwarrantably challenged by those who presume to know the College's and John's affairs better than they knew it. In 1596 John Shakspeare had made the statement which the inexpert (inexpert because young) Herald

(Augustine Vincent, the original owner of the "unique First Folio" now in the possession of Mr. Folger.) who wrote the draft did not get quite straight, that while he was Bailiff of Stratford, some twenty-five years earlier, a pattern of arms, i. e., a sketch or trick of arms, had been assigned to him by Clarenceux Cook. (If A. Vincent was born in 1584, how could he have written this draft in 1596?) It appears then that the 1596 transaction was in reality an exemplification or confirmation of that pattern. Garter Dethick having complied with the applicant's request in 1596, the Heralds might with perfect accuracy and in accordance with the customs of the College speak of his ancient coat-of-arms assigned to him during his bailiffship. As Mr. Charles H. Athill, the present incumbent of the office of Richmond Herald, writes us (in a letter dated "College of Arms, London, December 21, 1908"), the fact that "the (1596) Arms appear again in the assignment for Arden in 1599 clearly proves, if proof were necessary, that the 1596 patent did pass, otherwise they would not have been included in that patent."

From the absence of any recorded instance of the assumption of the Arden arms by any member of the Shakspeare family—and from other facts to be aduced hereafter—it seems reasonably certain that the

application for permission to impale those arms was not granted or was withdrawn by the applicant. On the poet's monument in the Stratford Church only the Shakspeare arms are displayed, and those arms alone appear impaled on the seal and on the tombstone of William's eldest daughter, Susannah Hall. On the gravestone of Dr. John Hall, the poet's son-in-law, only the Shakspeare arms are impaled with those of



Arden arms sketched in the 1599 draft.
(Ar - white; Or - gold; Az - blue; Gu - red.)

Hall, and the tombstone of Thomas Nash, the first husband of the poet's grandchild, Elizabeth Hall, shows the arms of Nash, Bulstrode, Hall and Shakspeare, but not those of Arden. (These are reproduced in G. R. French's *Shakspeareana Genealogica*, London,

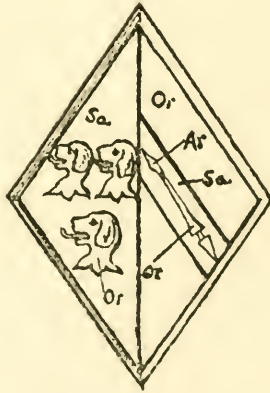
1869, pp. 413-415.)

The facts just mentioned, taken in connection with those that follow, prove beyond the possibility of any doubt that the Shakspeare arms had been granted and, since the 1599 application was not approved by the Heralds, that the grant must have been made in 1596. The supposition that puritan Dr. Hall would have had those arms sculptured on the poet's Stratford monument, or would have borne them himself, or that the other members of the family would have done so, if the coat had not been granted, is preposterous. Judging from the resolutions passed by the Stratford council in 1611 and 1612 (See Mrs. Stopes' *Shakespeare's Family*, p. 225.) actors and playwrights were not held in such high esteem in Stratford as to allow the depiction of unassigned armorial insignia on a "common player's" tomb within the choir of Holy Trinity Church. In connection with this it must be borne in mind that by the law of the realm painters, gravers, etc., were strictly prohibited from painting, graving, etc., a coat-of-arms which was not lawfully borne, and that the deputies of the Kings-of-Arms had the right to pull down and deface any tomb or monument that bore a coat-of-arms which had not been legally assigned. (See J. Edmondson's *A Complete Body of Heraldry*, London, 1780, Vol. I, pp. 158-159, and J.

Guillim's *A Display of Heraldry*, London, 1724, p. 15.)

The conclusions arrived at in the preceding paragraph are corroborated by a series of facts which may be thus arrayed:

1. Early in the 17th century (? 1601) one Ralph Brooke—the most unpopular member of the College—York Herald, galled at the advancement of the



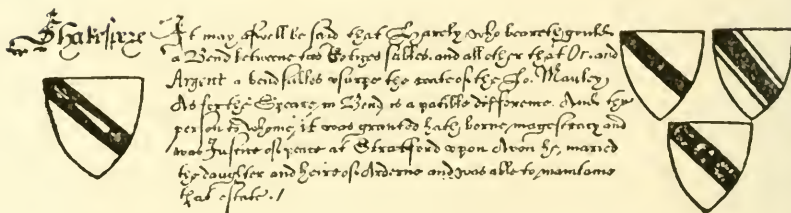
Arms of Susanna Hall.
(Sa - black)

“learned” William Camden over his head, preferred charges against his superiors, alleging that they had granted arms improperly in some twenty-three in-

stances, John Shakspeare's among them. Camden and Dethick, in their answer to the commission which had been specially appointed to investigate these charges, say (*MS. Coll. of Arms*, Vol. W-Z, f. 276.) that objections had been made "to certen arms supposed to be wrongfully *given*." (Italics ours.) In their address to the commission they speak of objections having been made concerning "these *arms granted*, or the persons to whom *they have been granted*." (Italics ours.) The mere fact that the malicious Brooke ("None were secure from his unmerited attacks" says Mark Noble in his *History of the College of Arms*.) included the arms of Shakspeare in his strictures shows that these arms had been granted; the arraignment of his superiors would have been ridiculous had he included in his complaint arms which had not been granted. Besides, the Kings of Arms admit that the arms complained of had been assigned. It is with pleasure that we add that even Mr. Lee concedes that Brooke's complaint was "based on vexatious grounds that could not be upheld."

2. In their defence of the Shakspeare grant Dethick and Camden (May 10, 1602) use the following words: "The person to whom *it was granted* hath borne magestracy." (Italics ours.) That only the Shakspeare arms (and not the Arden arms) were ob-

jected to by Brooke and that, consequently, only they had been granted, are shown by the fact that in their answer ("it was granted") Camden and Dethick speak only of those arms and the Shakspeare coat alone is sketched (in colors) in the margin. (See facsimile in the *Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica*, Second Series, 1886, Vol. 1, p. 109.) In passing we may



Reply of Dethick and Camden
 (Reduced facsimile)

remark that the genuineness of the documents herein referred to has never been questioned.

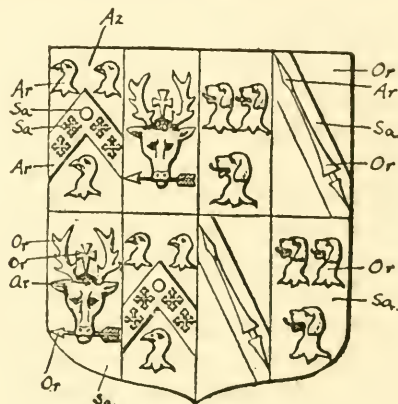
3. In the *Harleian MS. 6140*, at folio 45, (in the British Museum) there is a tricking of the arms of "William (sic) Shackspeare, a pattennt per William Detlike, Garter Principal King of Arms." This of

itself would seem to prove that only the 1596 application, which came before Dethick alone, was successful. It is greatly to be regretted that not one of those who have heretofore studied this subject—Malone, Nichols, Halliwell-Phillipps, Tucker, Lee—have thought it worth while to ascertain when and by whom this entry was written. Our own efforts to do this, though accompanied by the willingness to pay the customary pounds and shillings, have proved fruitless.

4. In the so-called "Sixth Edition" of John Guillim's *Display of Heraldry*, London, 1724, p. 338, we find a description of the Shakspeare coat supplemented with the statement that it had been "*given by William Dethick Garter, to William (sic) Shakespear the renowned Poet.*" (See our *Shakspeare's Coat-of-Arms*, p. 15.) Inasmuch as the editor of this learned work could not have obtained his information other than at first hand from documents in the College or elsewhere—Nicholas Rowe's *Account of the Life, etc., of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), the only biography of the poet then available, says nothing about the coat-of-arms—his testimony is of importance in establishing the fact that the application made in 1596 terminated in a patent.

5. In the *Index College of Arms*, or "*E. D. N. Alphabet*" ("a book in which the Officers of Arms

make notes of any Coats of Arms they are interested in,"—Chas. H. Athill, *Richmond Herald*, in a letter to the writer dated "London, 30 Nov. 1908."), the Shakspeare coat is described and said to have been "granted 20 October, 1596, to John Shakspeare, of



Arms of Thos. Nash.

Stratford-upon-Avon, in Com. Warr., Gent., per WILL DETHICK." This entry, written (as we learn from Mr. Athill) by John Warburton, *Somerset Herald* (1720-1759), furnishes strong evidence as to the grant of a patent in 1596.

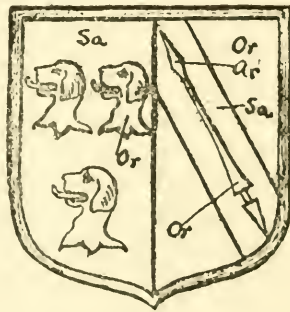
6. Mr. Chas. H. Athill (under date "College of

Arms, London, 21 Dec., 1908") writes us: "The (Shakspeare) arms appear again in the assignment for Arden in 1599, clearly proving, if proof were necessary, that the 1596 Patent did pass, otherwise they would not have been inserted in that Patent * * * The issuing of the Patent has never been questioned here."

7. After 1597 William Shakspeare is described as "Gent." and "Master" in numerous documents and in the published writings of his contemporaries. Aside from the question whether the dramatist would have permitted this had he not been entitled to it, this testimony is of value inasmuch as no official, clerk, scrivener, etc., was permitted to give in any writing the addition of "esq." or "gent." to one not lawfully entitled thereto. In the reign of Henry VIII. the Kings of Arms had been empowered "to reprove, control and make infamous by proclamation all such as unlawfully and without just authority, usurped or took any name or title of honour or dignity, as esquire, gentleman, or other." (Cf. Edmondson, *l. c.*)

We may well pause to inquire whether the solution of the questions dealt with in the preceding pages throws any light on the character of William Shakspeare? Unquestionably, yes. Mr. Sidney Lee,—and we cite him especially only because of his eminence

and the popularity of his work,—having assumed that no arms had been granted the Shaksperes in 1596, says (*Shakespeare's Life and Work*, New York, 1900, p. 95): "In 1599 their efforts were crowned with success. Changes in the interval (1596-1599) among the officials at the College may have facilitated the proceedings. In 1597 the Earl of Essex had become Earl



Arms of John Hall.

Marshal and chief of the Heralds' College; while the great scholar and antiquary, William Camden, had joined the College, also in 1597, as Clarenceux King-of-Arms. The poet was [?] favorably known to both Camden and the Earl of Essex, the close friend of the

Earl of Southampton. His father's application now took a new form. No grant of arms was asked for. It was asserted without qualification that the coat had been assigned to John Shakespeare while he was bailiff, and the heralds were merely invited to give him a 'recognition' or 'exemplification' of it. [This is one of those unwarranted assertions which so mar Mr. Lee's biography of the poet.] An exemplification was invariably secured more easily than a new grant of arms. The heralds might, if they chose, tacitly accept, without examination, the applicant's statement that his family had borne arms long ago, and they thereby regarded themselves as relieved of the obligation of close inquiry into his present status. * * * The College officers were characteristically complacent" (!). That there was less responsibility attaching to an exemplification than to an original grant of arms we utterly deny. Dethick knew better. In June, 1597, eight months after John's first application, a verdict had been rendered in Star Chamber proceedings declaring Dethick culpable in the granting of an unwarranted exemplification to George Rotheram, and he was not likely to repeat the offense, especially when Ralph Brooke, the watchdog of the College, was on the alert for just such an opportunity to attack him. If Mr. Lee's theory were correct we should have to

regard William Shakspere (the greatest, wisest and loftiest teacher of mankind) and his father (one of the oldest and most respected citizens of Stratford) as having entered into a conspiracy with the heads of the College to have themselves enrolled among the gentry. Apart from our aversion to believe this of the author of "Hamlet" and "Lear" and "The Tempest," we find that the known facts, singly and collectively, refute the implied charge of fraud and venality in the application. Arms having been granted in 1596, no application for arms was made in 1599 and there was no need for Southampton's influence with the College. There was no demand on the "characteristic complacency" of the College officers. Moreover, that "influence" was not operative in 1599 is evident from the fact that the request for Arden arms did not terminate in a grant.

But all this tells us only that William Shakspere did not resort to fraud and corruption to have himself made a "gentleman." It does not tell us anything positive about the great actor-poet; and yet it is of inestimable value as showing us that the beautiful picture of him—dim and shadowy as that is—drawn by his contemporaries is not inconsistent with the results of modern research. It is none the less true that, as Ingleby says, "after the lapse of two centuries

and a half of gropings into the vulgar life and outward seeming of the man, it is happily (?) quite hopeless to draw his frailties from their dread abode."



"Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny."





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